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Leading through

IN MANY WAYS, “the perfect storm” describes well the situation facing higher education leaders at the turn of this new century. They may well feel tossed, turned, carried along by powerful forces, struggling to keep their ships afloat, overwhelmed, overpowered, engulfed, submerged. The adjectives and metaphors could go on and on. A scan of the external environment reveals some of the “gathering storm clouds,” the climatic conditions producing this perfect storm:

- a larger and more diverse student body that attends college in more chaotic ways
- the new needs of the twenty-first-century workplace
- the rapidly changing information age
- the parallel universe of for-profit and corporate-based educational providers
- increasing competition for public resources
- a stricter regulatory environment at all levels of government

How can leaders bring to fruition a collective vision of powerful, relevant education for all college students?

While college is now serving a different role in society—educating all students, not just the elite, for a complex, constantly changing, globally interdependent world—the higher education enterprise has been slow in adapting to the new realities. It is still largely working from an outmoded vision with its many barriers to better achievement by all students. The traditional academy—which, to continue the nautical metaphor, we can call “Old Ironsides”—like the *USS Constitution*, may be beautiful and have a proud history but be imperfectly suited to contemporary needs. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), in its report *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (2002), offers a path through the stormy conditions by embracing an education better suited to this new role.

Built on innovative practices discovered at all types of institutions, the *Greater Expectations* report describes a “New Academy” committed to college access for all those who desire a postsecondary education, especially students from traditionally underrepresented groups.

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Access alone is insufficient, however; so this New Academy also is committed to success for all students through proper preparation before college and comprehensive attention to learning in college. With higher expectations aligned across all the levels of learning, students will experience a high-quality college education. To achieve these ambitious commitments, concerted action by the various stakeholder groups will be needed, including across the high school–secondary education boundary.

At the center of the New Academy is a reinvigorated liberal education for all students no matter where they attend college or what they study: reinvigorated by becoming practical and engaged in both its learning outcomes and its learning processes. Such a practical and

a Perfect Storm



engaged liberal education will produce “intentional learners” who are purposeful, integrative, and self-reflective about the process of learning. Intentional learners will be empowered through the mastery of intellectual and practical skills, informed through broad and deep knowledge from many fields, and responsible for their own actions and for those of society.

Interestingly, a *de facto* consensus seems to be growing among accreditors, employers, and faculty members that the broad and transferable capacities central to such a liberal education are, in fact, essential to personal success in today’s knowledge-based society no matter a person’s chosen career (AAC&U 2004). These capacities will also best serve society in the twenty-first century.

Achieving the *Greater Expectations* vision is a long-term endeavor that will require changed practices throughout the higher education enterprise, practices that become more intentional in aligning actions with desired outcomes. What will institutional leadership for this New Academy entail? How can leaders bring to fruition a collective vision of powerful, relevant education for all college students? What type of leadership will maximize the probability of weathering the perfect storm?

Leaders with clear sight and their eyes on the prize

Piloting a ship safely though turbulent waters demands knowledge of the final destination as well as a plan for reaching it. In a parallel manner, clarity of the desired ends is essential to intentional educational practice. Without it, success becomes difficult to determine and choices relatively random. For a campus community, the educational achievements of its graduating students are an essential (the essential?) manifestation of its goals. Helping a campus community clarify its collective expectations for graduates may be the most important leadership challenge. What do the college years, or 120 credits, add up to? At the end, what should students know and be able to do with their learning? The “growing consensus” and “intentional learner,” both concepts derived from a broad scan of what society believes college students need when they graduate, are useful frameworks for conversation.

However, since the end cannot be reached without wise decisions having been made along the way, leadership for intentional practice would also clarify the expectations of students at entry into college, of individual courses to form a coherent curriculum, and of the faculty in the learning process. In part, such clarification means making these expectations transparent, evident to everyone including prospective students and their parents, high school college counselors, enrolled students, newly hired faculty and staff members, and departments.

At the institutional level, a leader might raise for consideration the following questions:

- Do we have a clear, shared, and widely distributed statement of learning outcomes that is tied to our mission? If so, is the

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emphasis and balance among the outcomes distinctive for our institution and its mission?

- Given the growing national consensus on the aims of college, does our statement stress the important learning outcomes all students need for the twenty-first century (i.e., the outcomes of an engaged and practical liberal education identified in the *Greater Expectations* report)?
- Can students describe what their education adds up to?

Looking within institutions, at the school, department, program, or course level, leaders might ask the community to reflect on the following questions:

- Do individual units have learning outcomes that resonate with our institution-wide list?
- Are programmatic outcomes clear (e.g., the role of general education in the curriculum, the reason for internationalizing the curriculum)?
- How well do faculty members explain to students the objectives for their courses? In what ways do these objectives relate to the broader departmental and institutional outcomes?

Leaders as cultural change agents

Caught in a storm, a ship's captain needs to sense the shifting waters and adapt nimbly to changing conditions. So too, in contemporary higher education, leaders need a perceptive understanding of the underlying culture as well as an awareness of how that culture may need to change in response to new environments. In its concept of the New Academy, *Greater Expectations* describes a culture different in a number of important ways from the one that currently characterizes U.S. higher education.

Toward a culture that focuses on learning

Achieving better learning by all students will require a culture that is truly centered on learning. As any student or teacher knows well, learning is not necessarily the same as teaching; even after a brilliant lecture, for example, students can remain confused about the topic. Providing an education focused on learning requires taking the student perspective and asking how well students are achieving the expectations set by the faculty. Successful teaching, therefore, inherently includes finding out where the students are in their learning and leading them all on to the next level. Student achievement serves as a

better measure of success than the degrees of the teachers or the content covered; student accomplishment becomes the important outcome rather than courses completed or even graduation rates.

Guiding a college or university toward a focus on learning will involve engaging the faculty in conversations about the following questions, among many others:

- How can we move from an emphasis on credits earned or courses completed toward an understanding of the learning that occurs over time and across courses?
- What mechanisms will encourage student responsibility, under faculty and staff guidance, for planning coherent programs of study and cocurricular learning?
- What actions will help refocus education on the student as learner rather than on the faculty member as teacher?
- How can the institution and all its personnel model lifelong learning?

Toward a culture of evidence

In a culture of evidence, institutions and the people within them want to know how well they are succeeding and how to improve. They apply critical evaluation to their own performance and the performance of their various units (departments, colleges). To combine the focus on learning with a commitment to evaluation, the most important evidence will be how well students are learning. Deep appreciation of assessment as an inherent part of high-quality teaching would ensure the collection of relevant evidence that would feed back into a cycle of continuous improvement. Part of such a culture would be a shift to assessing learning directly through the examination of student work products rather than by relying on indirect measures such as student self-reports or retention.

Leadership to create a culture of evidence will need to ensure a safe environment for sharing assessment findings linked to the expectation of transparency of aggregated results (to find out together how well students as a group are succeeding). The desired end of gathering and evaluating the data is a systemic one: to improve education, not to assign blame or make judgments about individual teachers. Leaders must also provide the resources, ongoing moral support, and appreciation for faculty members as they learn how to assess in

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authentic, relevant ways and then make appropriate use of the findings. It will be essential to allocate resources (financial and personnel) wisely, which means gathering the information needed, but not amassing information for its own sake.

Many campuses attempt to assess all learning outcomes in every course and then cannot figure out how to use the reams of data. Finally, enlightened leaders will need to offer ironclad guarantees that assessment of student learning and faculty evaluation for promotion and tenure are completely separate processes.

Questions for conversation include the following:

- How can we assess students' levels of learning and then help them all advance?
- What is the crucial information we need to gather to show how well students are learning what we identify as important? How can this data be used to improve learning?
- Where in the curriculum could this evidence gathering occur if we consider learning that develops over time and across courses?

Building faculty corporate responsibility for the curriculum

Creating coherence in undergraduate education requires a different mindset about courses. Rather than being seen as distinct from one another and “owned” by the faculty member who teaches them, courses need to be understood as related to one another—from the perspective of student learning. Too often, faculty members fail to draw evident connections for students among courses, especially if the course offerings are not part of formal learning communities. The curriculum in many majors (with the possible exception of disciplines that are inherently more sequential, like mathematics or foreign languages) and in almost all general education programs is little more than a collection of disconnected, individual courses. Often professors lack information about what students have learned previously or what they will study next. For example, have they already been taught to write a research paper at the college level? Have they been taught it five times over?

The cultural shift required is toward faculty corporate responsibility for the entire curriculum. No longer would individual faculty members

feel responsible only for the courses they teach; no longer would departments simply care about the major. All faculty members would accept the responsibility for ensuring that students evolve and mature in their learning—general liberal learning as well as disciplinary content.

Leaders need to take a hard look at the reality of what is rewarded and valued and the messages such reality communicates. Are teaching awards given for individual success in the classroom or for linking one's teaching to a coherent pathway? Questions leaders could use to guide conversations and evaluate the existing culture include the following:

- In what ways does our campus reify the culture of individual ownership of courses? In what ways does it hold departments collectively responsible?
- How might our reward structures, curricular processes, and advising be modified to shift this balance?

Leaders as holistic thinkers

To captain a crew through a perfect storm requires deep knowledge of the ship, of its people, and of how the whole adds up to more than the sum of its parts. Leaders for the New Academy also need to be holistic thinkers, seeing both the big picture and how the smaller elements interrelate. On many campuses, while innovative programs have arisen to meet perceived needs, those programs are often isolated from one another and dependent upon a committed individual or small group. Even a rich array of programs can function on the margins of an institution, involve a limited population of students, or be poorly integrated into a campus's core work. Most disturbingly, this can be the case even when the various programs have strong potential to build on and reinforce one another, thereby enhancing the impact of them all. Leaders will be called upon to think holistically about their institutions, to understand the benefits of synergy, and to facilitate collective approaches in the campus community.

For example, a campus might have a first-year seminar and a writing-across-the-curriculum program that are separate from each other and also unrelated to general education. Or a major may have an excellent senior capstone

experience whose content, assignments, or intellectual skill development fail to link back to the previous courses it is meant to “cap.” Does it make sense to expect students to perceive the connections if faculty and staff, being much more experienced learners, are unable to do so?

One tool available to leaders is the “audit,” whether it is conducted of the curriculum or of existing academic and student support programs. An audit gathers information on what already exists, with the analysis organized around the goals the institution is trying to achieve so as to assure intentional decision making.

A leader can also strive for holistic thinking as a way to help the community maintain focus on its strategic priorities and reform agenda. While it may seem surprising, campuses can undertake major curricular projects such as the renewal of general education that are invisible in their admissions material, absent from their Web sites, or left out of presidential state of the university addresses. Consistently providing the large “umbrella” under which all the initiatives fit, and drawing connections among them, will keep the eyes of the community and all its constituent parts “on the prize,” moving together in concerted action.

The following are some questions for conversation:

- Has our institution audited the programs already in place to see how well they align with our desired outcomes and how effectively they interconnect with one another?
- Do we have a plan for better integrating our various initiatives and programs so they are understood as part of a comprehensive reform agenda?
- Do academic and strategic planning center on our desired learning outcomes?
- How can we assure that our self-study process for accreditation derives from our institution’s goals, learning outcomes, and reform agenda?

Leaders as partners with the public

In times of meteorological crisis, the captain needs to ensure that his ship’s crew effectively interacts with others (including other vessels and the National Weather Service). Similarly, as higher education faces the perfect storm, leaders need to work collaboratively with the public as both “consumers” and “supporters” of education; in other words, the academy cannot remain an ivory tower. Leaders need to express

this conviction and model it in their actions. Partnering with the public can take the form of raising awareness about higher education’s mission or of concerted action. Raising awareness could involve educating the public about

- how college is now enrolling a different population of students, more diverse and varied in preparation;
- the characteristics of a powerful, engaged, and practical liberal education that will serve both individuals and society well in the contemporary environment;
- learning as a complex process that involves more than simple factual recall;
- the important questions assessment can answer that require more than standardized tests;
- the need for supportive, rather than restrictive, public policies at all levels.

Partnering for action could involve working with various stakeholder groups to improve preparation for college, change public policies, and assure adequate funding. Questions for consideration include the following:

- In what ways do our institution’s leaders, in an ongoing manner, accept responsibility for engaging with policy makers (at the local, state, or national level) about the important outcomes of college, the public good of education, the need to prepare all students for college success, and appropriate demands for accountability?
- In what ongoing ways do we bring external stakeholders (including business leaders) into conversations about learning, the important outcomes of twenty-first-century college study, and the need for lifelong learners?
- In what substantive ways do we work with K–12 to improve student preparation for a challenging liberal education, and are they sufficient?
- Do we individually and collectively as an institution keep abreast of changes in the disciplines and the world of work so our students are well prepared to enter into careers?

How is leadership through the perfect storm already occurring?

Enlightened higher education leaders are already manifesting the kind of leadership needed to weather the storm and achieve the New Academy vision described in *Greater Expectations*; they are doing so in varied, powerful ways. The New Academy builds on the innovations



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these leaders have nurtured on their campuses, and so it is no surprise that many colleges and universities see their best, most creative work reflected in the vision set forth in the *Greater Expectations* report; they feel a part of the national movement. Yet they also sense and are responding to pressure toward greater effort, toward becoming more intentional, and toward expanding on their successes.

By stimulating conversation

AAC&U has encouraged presidents to engage the campus with the external community and discuss the *Greater Expectations* vision in campus-community dialogues. Many have already done so, sometimes in collaboration with colleagues from nearby colleges and universities. Such dialogues, involving to date over 1,500 people from the higher education community and beyond, provide a venue for discussing the role of college in society and the learning that should result from a high-quality college education. Participants enthusiastically praise the seriousness of the conversations and the value of the experiences that have created a stronger shared commitment to better learning. A number of dialogues already have fostered longer-term collaborative projects.

Leaders have used the *Greater Expectations* report to frame conversations on campus, too, and across campuses: at faculty retreats, trustee meetings, faculty development workshops. Some ordered the report in bulk and distributed it to the entire faculty, while others downloaded the PDF from www.greaterexpectations.org.

Through action

Many leaders have moved their institutions beyond the conversation stage to planning and used the report's ideas as the basis for academic and strategic plans or to frame accreditation self-studies. In the best of cases, planning produces action, and many campuses have inspirational stories to tell about real change occurring.

From institutional reports, it appears as if action is taking a new shape. Instead of simply focusing on isolated issues (for example, a

freshman-year experience), campus leaders are examining their practices more holistically to ensure that the various programs already in place are mutually reinforcing one another to enhance learning. The *Greater Expectations* report has provided common language and encouraged a less atomized approach to education.

As each individual campus extracts from the report what most resonates with its mission and culture, one would expect to see great variety—variety regarding the area of concentration (e.g., will a campus work on developing a coherent curriculum, on making teaching more effective, on establishing close relationships with K-12?), variety in how implementation proceeds, and variety in the design of the final product. This, indeed, is occurring even within the units of a single institution. Leaders are well aware that local conditions will set the parameters for action.

Conclusion

Fearful as the perfect storm may be, clear sight, intentional action, and wise leadership will allow U.S. higher education, which has traditionally been adaptable, to find a way through the turbulent wind and waters. While not quite as beatific and sanguine as “sailing into calm waters,” the New Academy vision suggests that we can both learn to manage in stormy conditions and become stronger for the hardships endured. However, simply battening down the hatches and waiting for the storm to pass over is not the answer. Nimbleness, self-reflection, and a willingness to change with the times are characteristics not just of the students we want to produce, but of the institutions we need to build. Isn’t this what it really means to model the lifelong learning higher education advocates? □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

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